

SHAPING THE CITY

Roger K. Lewis

Reimagining 'New Town' Columbia as a New City

Columbia has never looked or felt like a city, despite being the size of one. Is it time for that to change?

Founded as a "new town" four decades ago by James Rouse, Columbia is still not an incorporated municipality but rather an area, albeit a large one, of Howard County. It encompasses many land uses and nearly 100,000 people but has remained predominantly a bedroom community. Columbia is "sub-urban" and continues to convey a pastoral image, with its low density and curving parkways and streets, and looping drives and cul-de-sacs.

But that could change if Howard County approves a proposal on the future of Columbia's center.

General Growth Properties, a Chicago company that owns about 240 acres of the 364-acre Town Center Revitalization District, including the sprawling Mall in Columbia and acres of surface parking, has submitted an ambitious plan to reshape parts of the district into a more urban downtown.

The company's proposal, submitted as an amendment to the county's General Plan 2000, features state-of-the-art urban design thinking that is attributable to master-plan architects Cooper, Robertson & Partners and landscape architects Sasaki Associates.

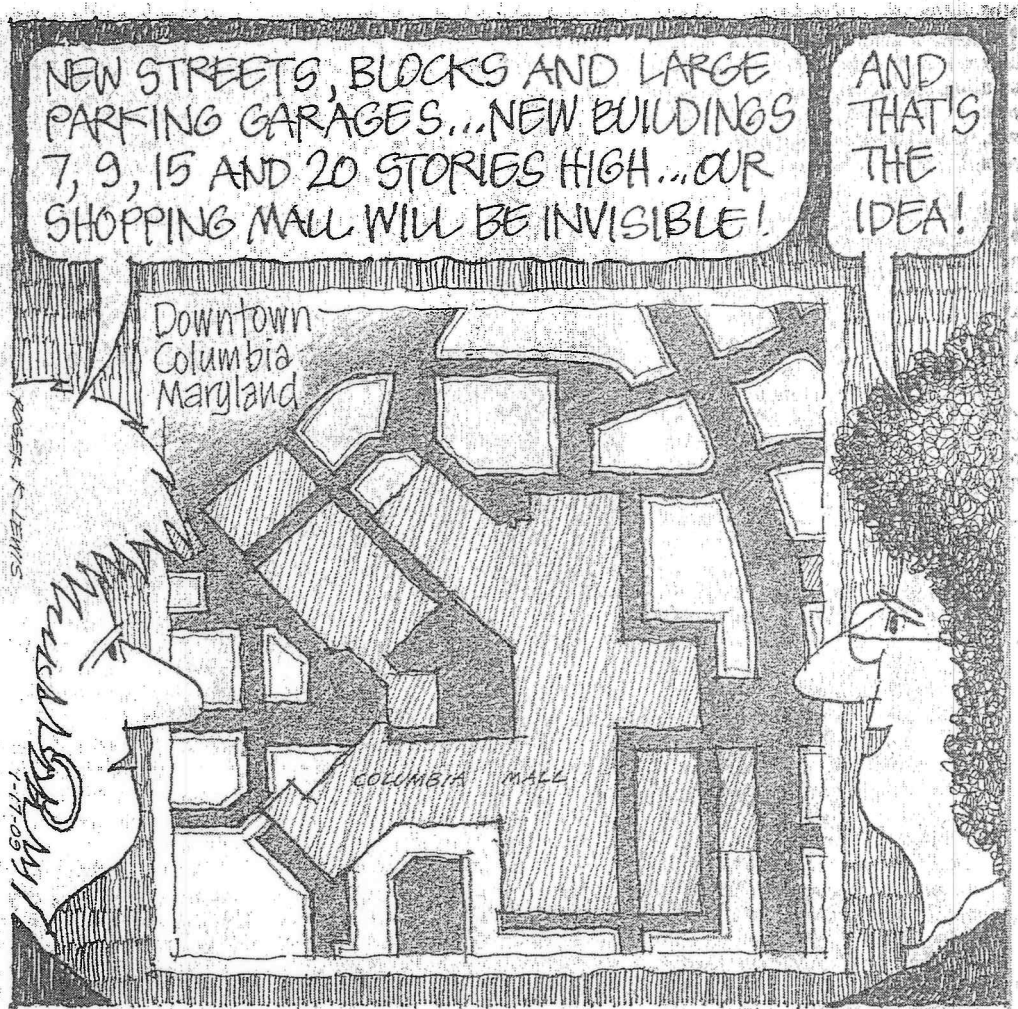
While preserving the mall and buildings around it, the General Growth Properties plan superimposes a pattern of blocks and civic spaces defined by a grid of tree-lined, pedestrian-friendly streets. It also includes strategies for transportation management, parking, transit, environmental protection, sustainability, energy conservation and phasing.

Over several decades, 5,500 apartments and townhouses, 640 hotel rooms, more than 1 million square feet of retail space, and nearly 5 million square feet of office space would be added. Surface parking lots would be replaced by parking garages imbedded within blocks and made financially feasible by increased density.

Yet the plan enhances the district's open space network of landscaped plazas, pedestrian promenades and natural areas, including the Merriweather Post Pavilion and surrounding park and the underused Lake Kittamaquundi.

Because inhabitants of dense housing in the Town Center would mostly be singles and couples with few or no children, General Growth Properties and the county anticipate that growth would not strain the school system.

But not all of Columbia's residents want the Town Center to become more citylike. Many chose life in Columbia as an affordable, aesthetically desirable alternative to life in the city or an anonymous subdivision. They embraced Rouse's original "New America" vision and believe it should not be altered or



BY ROGER K. LEWIS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

jeopardized.

Despite assurances to the contrary and the county's adequate public-facilities ordinance, some residents also worry that redevelopment will overburden infrastructure — access roads, utility systems, schools and community facilities.

In fact, it's fair to ask why Columbia needs a "real downtown," setting aside the economic motivations of the developer and the county.

I first addressed this question in 1989 in an article for Columbia magazine and tried again last week when I was invited to give a talk, "Becoming a City: Lessons for Downtown Columbia."

Conditions that shaped Rouse's vision and the Columbia plan in the 1960s have changed profoundly. The majority of American households are not nuclear families. Increasingly, people who once might have shunned cities and willingly mowed lawns appreciate urban amenities.

Rebuilding the Town Center could make tomorrow's Columbia more vibrant and more competitive with other communities as a place to live, work, and find cultural, social and entertainment opportunities.

Principles and practices of town planning

and urban design also have evolved since the 1960s. We know that compact, mixed-use development helps improve the planet while yielding more attractive, walkable environments. With viable transportation alternatives, densely built neighborhoods can reduce automobile usage. Green design applied to cities as well as buildings saves energy, conserves natural resources, decreases carbon emissions, and reduces air and water pollution.

And we have rediscovered the social, cultural and aesthetic value of well-designed, interconnected streets, civic spaces and space-making architecture. We appreciate design that imparts a coherent sense of place, order and identity.

Thus, which choice makes the most sense: preserving the form and function of Columbia Town Center as originally envisioned in the 1960s or embracing a vision to create a vital downtown for the 21st century? Given today's circumstances and tomorrow's needs, the latter is the only sensible response.

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